

Postal services to Greece subject to delay

Hongkong Post announced today (February 28) that, as advised by the postal administration of Greece, due to a local strike at the destination, mail delivery services to Greece are subject to delay.

SME Financing Guarantee Scheme extends application period

The following is issued on behalf of the Hong Kong Monetary Authority:

The Financial Secretary announced in the 2024-25 Budget that the application period of the 80% Guarantee Product and the 90% Guarantee Product of the SME Financing Guarantee Scheme (SFGS) be extended for two years to end-March 2026.

Enterprises wishing to apply for loans may approach the lending institutions. Details including the list of participating lenders are available on the SFGS webpage: www.hkmc.com.hk/sfgs. For public enquiries, please call the SFGS Hotline at 2536 0392.

LCQ6: Support service centres for ethnic minorities

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Chun-ying and a written reply by the Secretary for Home and Youth Affairs, Miss Alice Mak, in the Legislative Council today (February 28):

Question:

It is learnt that the Home Affairs Department will set up two additional support service centres for ethnic minorities (EM centres) this year, bringing the total number of EM centres to 10, and invite each of the 10 EM centres to set up an Ethnic Minority Care Team (EM Care Team) to proactively reach out to ethnic minority households and residents, so as to understand

their needs and introduce to them public services they require. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of various support service items (including language classes, interest classes, and after-school tutorial classes) launched by various EM centres and the number of attendees for such activities in each of the past three years;

(2) whether the authorities have, since the Commission on Poverty conducted the Study on Ethnic Minorities' Awareness and Satisfaction towards Selected Public Services (including integration services provided by EM centres) in 2016, collected the views of participants in activities organized by EM centres and conducted related consultation on services provided by EM centres and the way forward; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) whether it has set relevant basic criteria for the establishment of the two new EM centres, such as their location and size; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(4) whether it has assessed if there is overlap in functions between EM Care Teams and the existing District Services and Community Care Teams, if there is room for collaborative service provision, and if there are differences in their respective selection process and monitoring mechanism?

Reply:

President,

(1) The Home Affairs Department (HAD) has commissioned non-profit-making organisations to run eight support service centres for ethnic minorities (support service centres) in Wan Chai, Yau Tsim Mong, Sham Shui Po, Kwun Tong, Yuen Long, Tuen Mun, Kwai Tsing and Tung Chung. The support service centres provide language classes, after-school tutorial classes, integration programmes (including interest classes), etc to ethnic minorities to facilitate their integration into the community. Among these centres, the CHEER Centre in Kwun Tong also provides general interpretation and translation services of English and eight ethnic minority languages (i.e. Bahasa Indonesia, Hindi, Nepali, Punjabi, Tagalog, Thai, Urdu and Vietnamese) in non-specialised/non-professional areas.

In the past three project years (2020-21 project year to 2022-23 project year), the eight support service centres provided more than 1 200 language classes and after-school tutorial classes, some 11 000 integration programmes, more than 20 600 times of counselling, guidance and referral services, as well as some 28 000 times of interpretation and translation services, benefitting about 294 400 service recipients. The numbers of programmes and service recipients of the support service centres by service types are set out in Annex.

(2) The support service centres have all along collected views and feedbacks from service users and other stakeholders through various means, including

questionnaires, opinion collection boxes, focus groups, meetings with stakeholders, to ensure that the support service centres can provide services that meet the needs of ethnic minorities.

(3) According to the 2021 Population Census, the ethnic minority population in Hong Kong has been increasing over the years. Excluding foreign domestic helpers, there are about 301 000 ethnic minorities, representing an increase of over 50 per cent as compared to the 2011 Population Census. Taking into consideration of the population statistics and views from stakeholders, the two new support service centres will be set up in Kowloon Central (covering Kowloon City and Wong Tai Sin) and New Territories East (covering Sai Kung and Tseung Kwan O). The HAD is openly inviting eligible non-profit-making organisations to submit proposals to apply for funding to establish and operate the two new centres. The organisations are required to submit proposals with details including centre area, facilities, services and activity plans based on their experience and understanding of the needs of ethnic minorities for consideration by the HAD.

(4) The service recipients of District Services and Community Care Teams (Care Teams) in 18 districts include ethnic minorities. However, due to language and culture differences with ethnic minorities, the HAD will set up one Ethnic Minority Care Team (EM Care Team) mainly constituted by ethnic minorities in each of the support service centres to better serve ethnic minorities. The EM Care Teams are expected to commence their services within this year. The EM Care Teams will collaborate with the District Offices and Care Teams in the 18 districts. When Care Teams encounter difficulties in serving ethnic minorities, they can refer the cases to EM Care Teams for follow-up actions. The EM Care Teams will also provide assistance to affected ethnic minorities in cases of accidents, emergencies or disastrous events.

The support service centres have already established a good network with ethnic minority communities as well as different government departments and organisations, and have ample experience in serving ethnic minorities. Compared with openly inviting applications from other eligible organisations, setting up EM Care Teams in the support service centres can consolidate and make more effective use of existing resources to serve ethnic minorities.

Each EM Care Team shall comply with the guidelines and requirements issued by the HAD and are required to submit progress reports to the HAD regularly. The annual financial report of the support service centre must be audited by an independent certified public accountant. The HAD will closely monitor the operation of the EM Care Teams, including examining the progress reports submitted by the operating organisations, conducting inspection or attending relevant activities/services to evaluate the service effectiveness, and regularly reviewing the work progress and performance with the operating organisations. The relevant arrangements are generally similar to those for the Care Teams.

Transcript of remarks by CS on 2024-25 Budget (with video)

Following is the transcript of remarks by the Chief Secretary for Administration, Mr Chan Kwok-ki, at a media session at the Legislative Council Complex after the Financial Secretary delivered the Speech on the 2024-25 Budget today (February 28):

Just now, the Financial Secretary delivered the 2024-25 Budget.

With the concerted effort of the Government and society at large, Hong Kong has been gradually regaining its growth momentum after getting through the pandemic. That said, as an externally oriented and open economy, Hong Kong continues to be affected by the complex and volatile external environment and unstable global economic recovery. Together, we have overcome various challenges along the way.

With this in mind, I consider that the latest Budget steadfastly seeks progress while ensuring stability. With the sustainability of public finance fully taken into account, the Budget has adopted targeted and effective strategies to formulate a series of short-, medium- and long-term measures. The mission is clear, that is, to develop Hong Kong's economy and improve people's livelihood, and to strengthen Hong Kong's unique advantages of enjoying the strong support of the motherland while being closely connected to the world.

May I give you some highlights of the Budget.

First, targeted relief is provided for enterprises and citizens to speed up their post-pandemic recovery. Measures include taxes and rates reduction, extension of the SME Financing Guarantee Scheme, injection into the BUD Fund (Dedicated Fund on Branding, Upgrading and Domestic Sales), and an extra allowance for social security payment recipients.

Second, timely adjustments are made to the demand-side management measures of the property market to create favourable conditions for recovery. After prudent consideration of the overall current situation, the Budget announced that, with immediate effect, the Special Stamp Duty, the Buyer's Stamp Duty and the New Residential Stamp Duty for residential properties be all cancelled.

Third, our high-quality development is fostered for better integration into the national development. The Budget seeks to enhance the competitiveness of Hong Kong's "eight centres" under the National 14th Five-Year Plan; further attract enterprises, capital and talent to our city while grooming local talent; and strengthen tourism development through building the Hong Kong Brand.

Fourth, a fiscal consolidation programme is taken forward to control government expenditure and increase government revenue. Measures include containing the growth of operating expenditure and adjusting certain tax and fee items. The aim is to ensure the continued allocation of resources to provide and improve public services.

All in all, I fully support this year's Budget. I hope the Legislative Council will scrutinise and approve the appropriation bill as soon as possible. Let's continue to lead Hong Kong to advance from stability to prosperity and break new ground. Thank you very much.

(Please also refer to the Chinese portion of the transcript.)

CE's statement on 2024-25 Budget

The Chief Executive, Mr John Lee, today (February 28) issued the following statement on the 2024-25 Budget:

The Financial Secretary today delivered the second Budget of the current-term Government. Amid the uncertain geopolitical situation and economic fluctuations, this Budget puts forward a series of concrete measures to bolster confidence, respond to the expectations of the public and enterprises and consolidate the momentum of recovery. Taking a long-term view, we are committed to promoting Hong Kong's high-quality development, accelerating the growth of strategic industries, nurturing talent and strengthening our competitiveness.

The Financial Secretary has provided adequate resources to fully support the launch and implementation of the initiatives announced in the Policy Address. I welcome the Budget's fiscal consolidation programme, which focuses on restoring fiscal balance while fully taking into account the financial constraints of the public and businesses.

With the strong support from our country and the unifying efforts from all sectors of the community, I believe that Hong Kong will continue to leverage its advantages under "one country, two systems", strengthen the economy, improve people's livelihood, rise to the challenges and scale new heights. I share the Financial Secretary's confidence and optimism in Hong Kong's future, and I appeal to all sectors of the community to support this Budget.